

A Little Too Much Salt

By

Edwin A. Dark

"If I told you once, I told you a *thoooouusnd* times not to put salt in my food. I can't stand salt in my food. Makes me choke!"

Donny Ray Smith jabbed the fork into the oddly oval piece of jagged meat and flipped it over. The meat slapped the hot black cast iron skillet. Droplets of liquefied fat leaped up and then dove down onto the scorching skillet, exploding with a sizzle.

Some of the hot greasy droplets dove onto Donny Ray's A-shirt and the back of his fork-holding hand. "Dadgumit!" He sucked at the burnt skin on the back of his hairy hand, and then, looking over the edge, said through his teeth, "I'm going to show you how to cook a dadgum meal without putting salt in every dadgum thing!"

"*Donny Ray—*"

The greasy sizzling muffled Olga's pleas. She had been sitting in the chair long enough for her arms to go numb—both arms pushed through the wooden slats of the old chair, her wrists duct-taped to the chair's posts.

Donny Ray stabbed at the meat, not so much to tenderize it but to torture it.

"Married fifteen dadgum years, and each and every day of each and every year you put salt in each and every dadgum meal—even breakfast!" Donny Ray turned to Olga, flipping the

meated-fork back and forth at her, bits of grease and small pieces of fat flying towards the bound woman. "You trying to poison me? You know what too much salt does to your heart? Huh? It kills ya! It kills ya, dadgumit."

His eyes widened, and he stopped flipping the folk at her. He put his hands on his hips. "That's it, isn't? You trying to dadgum kill me, aren't ya?" He didn't wait for her reply. He spun around, faced the stove again, stabbed the fiery meat with a vengeance, lifted it—he smiled as the seared aroma danced in his nostrils—flipped it over; the meat slapped the black skillet; the meat and skillet sizzled at each other, hot grease and melting fat popping and dancing. Donny Ray stared at the meat—stared into the meat and saw the ruddy inner flesh melt from bloody pink to a slight tan.

He whispered to the meat, "Yeah, that's it. I thought so. She trying to dadgum kill me. Witch!"

"Donny Ray . . . p-please—"

She had stopped struggling against the silver tape some time ago, especially when she had lost all feeling from her shoulders to her fingertips. Her mouth was dry, not only from lack of water, but from the screaming and spastic panting.

She had sat unmoving—*how long?* She had forced her neck to remain locked into one position for too long, her head tilted slightly back. Her neck muscles stiffened into concrete columns, forcing her head to remain in the same static pose. She refused to look down, her head and neck frozen in place, straight, stiff, her face towards the perpendicular joint where the painted ceiling met the wall papered wall, eyes staring at the same spot for—*how long?* Eyes fixed on a little patch of wallpaper. Wallpaper she had hung years earlier when she first came to

America. When she had come to Oklahoma. Had come to Junebug. To marry Donny Ray. Eggshell white wallpaper faintly printed with roses and vines. Red roses. Blood red roses.

"Fifteen dadgum years!" Smith grabbed the small red and white can of pepper next to the stove, flipped up the plastic lid with a thick chipped and dirt-encrusted thumbnail and cascaded pepper on top of the sizzling and popping meat. "Pepper! That's what I like! Lots of pepper." He continued jerking the pepper can up and down, flecks of black and gray and white particles diving towards the meat, the pan, the top of the stove – pepper dust dancing and swirling in the air. Smith sneezed loud and hard. "Dadgumit!" He slammed the can on the countertop.

A small cloud of pepper dust sailed towards Olga, hovered over her head, and then settled into her hair and onto her sweaty face. The dust particles stabbed at her eyes. Her eyes watered. The dust nested around the edges of her nostrils. She twitched her nose. She didn't want to sneeze. She didn't want to move her head. She didn't want to look down.

She held her breath. The circle edges of her nostrils burned. The back of her throat was on fire. She fluttered her eyelids to force out more tears to push the pepper from the corners of her eyes. No tears. They had been cried out some time ago.

She fought off the sneeze.

Smith stabbed the meat with the fork, lifted it, and slapped it onto a chipped china plate. He twisted the gas stove burner knob and grabbed a large ladle. He jabbed the ladle into the small pot sitting next to the now empty but still sizzling skillet, scooped up a ladle of boiling creamed corn, dumped that onto the plate, and then dug the utensil into the small pot of boiling green beans sitting next to the corn; dumped those onto the plate; the liquid from both vegetables flooded the plate and mixed with grease and blood that oozed from the not-quite-done oval hunk of meat.

Smith smiled, lifted the plate, and then spun around. He held the plate chest high: His nose an inch from the meat, hovering from one end to the other. He did this twice, all the while breathing in the aroma, doggedly and deep. His eyes watered from the meat's greasy steam and the vapor of the boiled vegetables.

"*Ahhhhhh*," he whispered. "Now this is a meal I'm going to enjoy." He looked at Olga, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. "Without salt!"

He scuttled to the small dining table and sat the plate in his usual spot, just across from Olga. He looked at Olga with a slight smile. Then he frowned. "Why you twitching your dadgum nose? This smells better than any of that salted crap you've fed me for fifteen years!"

He zipped to the refrigerator, flung it open, and grabbed the nearly-empty crusty bottle of Heinz Tomato Ketchup, the half-spent loaf of stale Wonder Bread, and a dented can of Schlitz. He twirled, back kicked the fridge door shut, and announced, "I'm gonna have a dadgum cold beer with my meal, too! What do you think of that, Witch?" He rushed to the table without waiting for Olga to answer, knowing that Olga would not answer, smiling that Olga could not answer, and sat the ketchup, the bread, and the beer on the table. Then he sat in his chair.

He bowed his head and muttered a blessing. Donny Ray never ate without giving proper thanks for his meal.

"Amen."

He raised his head. He grabbed the folded cloth napkin beside the plate, jerked his wrist to flick it open—the cloth snapped with a loud burp and Olga's body twitched—and shoved one corner of the napkin into his tee-shirt's curved top. He grabbed the pepper shaker from the center of the table: a pepper shaker in the shape of windmill. It sat next to its twin saltshaker. Donny Ray stopped. He glowered at the saltshaker. He batted it with the back of his hand. The

saltshaker flew across the room where it shattered against the wall, salt crystals and glass shards falling to the wood floor. "No more salt," he said to Olga. Then he frowned. "Why the hell you twitching your nose?"

Olga sneezed. A sneeze that had been suppressed for several minutes. A sneeze that was loud and wet and violent. So violent it slammed her eyelids shut and wrenched her head forward and downward. A searing spastic pain shot through her neck like a blistering blade of lightning.

She opened her eyes and stared at the bloody hole in her right thigh where skin had hidden the flesh and muscle beneath only an hour earlier: An oddly shaped oval cut about one-half inch deep, four inches long, three inches wide. She gasped a near-silent high-pitched scream. The rapid panic panting started again. Her eyes widened, then watered.

"Oh, dadgumit!" Smith whined. "S'not that bad." He stood and leaned over the table to look at the wound. "I didn't cut no major arteries, and look: it's already fixing itself."

Olga wanted to take her eyes away from her gouged right thigh, away from the gaping wound, but her neck locked her head into a downward position. The bleeding had slowed and blood was congealing around the sawed ragged edges of her flesh—Donny Ray hadn't sharpened his Bowie knife in some time. Black and maroon crusts of hardened blood and dead flesh outlined the edges of the craggy wound and slowly crept towards the center, to seal the wound, to scab it over.

Smith sat, picked up his fork with his left hand, stabbed the tines into the flesh, picked up the bloody Bowie with his right hand—small bits of skin and flesh and muscle clinging to the serrated edges—and sawed off the thickest end of the cooked meat.

He put his knife down and switched the fork to his right hand. The victual sat impaled on the fork like a flag of triumph. Donny Ray's eyes gleamed and watered. He smiled. He looked across the top edge of the seared flesh at Olga's bowed head.

"Now, this is a piece of well-cooked meat. Without salt."

He glided the blistered and charred flesh into his mouth, closed his lips over the metal tines, and pulled the meat from the fork with his teeth, a bit of blood and grease squeezing from the corners of his mouth. He began to chomp, smacking his lips with each bite. He sighed and rolled his eyes at the taste of the flesh and the taste of the grease and the taste of the small amount of raw blood seeping into his mouth and trickling down his throat.

Donny Ray's eyes widened. He gagged. He spit the flesh from his mouth. The gnawed bit of meat shot across the table and hit Olga on the top of her bowed head and fell into the bound woman's lap. He grabbed the Bowie and flung it. Olga's sternum cracked as the knife cleaved her chest.

Olga's head jerked up, her neck vertebrae cracking, her raccoon eyes staring into the void.

Smith twisted his ruddy face into a thin wrinkled mass of leathered skin, his eyes narrowed into a glower at his wife. Red-tinged saliva dripped from the corners of his mouth, over his stretched thin bottom lip, and clung to his stubbled chin. He pointed his blood-tinged finger at Olga's vacant face.

"You POISONED me, *witch*. Dadgum you! You've eaten so much salt all your dadgum life so's that ya got too much dadgum salt *IN* ya."

Donny Ray reached across the table, grabbed the Bowie's handle and twisted the impaled blade in Olga's chest. "Maybe your heart will have less salt in it. Witch."

THE END

BIO: Edwin A. Dark lives a small town in southwest Oklahoma much like Junebug, Oklahoma, where his stories of horror, suspense, and terror are often set. He has taught public school for many years, which has well prepared him for writing horror.